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The Wrong Way To Protect Secrets

By a Pentagon panel that includes the military's chief polygraph examiner "concluded that the technique 'works better than chance,'" small comfort.

Moreover, as Congress's Office of Technology Assessment notes, polygraph testing is open to a number of "countermeasures" — physical and mental means by which a subject can trick the machine. The more skillful they are, the less likely a lie detector will catch him. Reliance on the polygraph could easily encourage the pursuit of mistaken leads and create a false sense of security, while overlooking the real spies.

The death penalty and polygraph exemplify a get-tough approach that makes us feel good but accomplishes little. At hand are less dramatic, more effective proposals:

There seems to be a developing consensus that one feature of our security system above all others has contributed to the crisis: too many people have access to classified material. Before we can cut down on the number of security clearances, we have to address a second feature: excessive classification. When everything is classified, everyone must have a clearance, even to do the most ordinary work. If we classify only what is valuable to the Kremlin, we could focus our resources on safeguarding that information.

The Administration, which shares blame for overclassifying information, recognizes that in its efforts to protect everything it has hampered its ability to protect anything. As Attorney General Edwin Meese 3d has said: "A lot of things which shouldn't be classified are, and therefore there is a kind of ho-hum attitude toward the protection of national security information."

If the Reagan Administration cuts back on the amount of information classified and the number of people with clearances, we can then address a third problem: the sizeable backlog in clearance checks. Follow-up investigations are supposed to be made every five years for access to top secret data, but recertifications are running 10 years behind. We should regularly recheck cleared employees and cancel the clearances of those who no longer need them. Finally, we should redouble efforts against the real culprits — the thousands of KGB and Eastern bloc agents operating in this country. They should be the focus of our attention, not the millions of Americans who serve in the military and defense-related industries.

In our eagerness to do something in response to the Walker allegations, let us at least take the time to do something sensible.

Five of the Walker men, it is believed, were not really traitors: their chief motivation was to help their new government to gain maximum recognition. Some would have been exfiltrated as double spies and never been caught; we hope to convert them into double agents or because they "damage" to national security would be aggravated by disclosure of further secrets. When we do convict spies, we tend to trade them for agents of our own. As Henry Schwartz, head of the American Civil Liberties Union has pointed out, an executed spy is no bargaining chip. Third, the deterrent prospect of the death penalty is not likely to have much effect on the cold-blooded spy. Trafors for hire, like killers for hire, do not expect to be caught. For them, the difference between life imprisonment and a death sentence is meaningless.

Similarly, it seems that use of the polygraph would do little to address weaknesses in the Walker case. Illustrate. The problem with polygraph testing is that it is not necessarily not lies. It points the finger of guilt at nervous innocent people while it misses the guiltless. Even the most innocuous can damn with sufficient force. A 1982 report pre-

pared for the House Select Committee on Intelligence on the subject concluded: